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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000656

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KU](#) [FREEDOM](#) [AGENDA](#)

SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA: PLANNING MINISTER SAYS ELECTORAL

REFORM AND LABOR AT THE TOP OF NEW CABINET'S AGENDA

REF: A. KUWAIT 636: PARLIAMENT REVISES DATE FOR
REDISTRICTING DEBATE

- [I](#)B. KUWAIT 601: NEW PRIME MINISTER PROMISES REFORMS
- [I](#)C. KUWAIT 495: FREE SEAT ON MUNICIPAL COUNCIL
- [I](#)D. KUWAIT 85: MOST SAY WOMEN WON'T WIN
- [I](#)E. 05 KUWAIT 5183: AUTOMATIC REGISTRATION OF WOMEN
VOTERS
- [I](#)F. 05 KUWAIT 4742: INTERIOR AND PLANNING MINISTERS
CONFIRM GOK TIP COMMITMENT
- [I](#)G. 05 KUWAIT 4740: PLANNING MINISTER ON ELECTORAL
REFORM
- [I](#)H. 05 KUWAIT 4460: GOK FORMS MINISTERIAL COMMITTEE
ON REDISTRICTING
- [I](#)I. 05 KUWAIT 4325: NDI CAMPAIGN SCHOOL
- [I](#)J. 05 KUWAIT 2931: PDAS CHENEY IN KUWAIT

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

[I](#)1. (C) Summary: During a February 27 call to congratulate the Minister on her re-appointment as Minister of Planning and Minister of State for Administrative Development Affairs, Dr. Ma'souma Al-Mubarak was generally optimistic about the new Government and echoed the Prime Minister's recent comments about reforms that would soon occur. She spoke at length on reduction of the number of electoral districts and was pleased that Parliament agreed to discuss the measure in April instead of June. Although she said there was no prefect formula for reshaping the districts, based on either demographics or population, reducing their numbers from 25 to 10, would promote transparency, and larger districts would create a more level playing field for female candidates. She complimented GOK efforts, such as the automatic registration of women voters and encouragement of political participation of women, but expressed disappointment with the work of women's groups and NGOs. She said Kuwaiti women needed to be encouraged to run for office and requested more training programs such as the September 2005 MEPI-funded NDI campaign school. She cited passage of a new labor law as another GOK priority and said that efforts to combat trafficking in persons and foreign worker exploitation needed to target source as well as destination countries. End summary.

Getting Serious about Electoral District Reform

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[I](#)2. (C) During the Ambassador's February 27 courtesy call on recently re-appointed Minister of Planning and Minister of State for Administrative Development Affairs Dr. Ma'souma Al-Mubarak, the Minister spoke at length on electoral redistricting and political reform. Referring to the February 21 decision by the National Assembly to address redistricting in April instead of June, she said the earlier date allows ample time for discussion, increasing the

possibility that a law could be passed before the 2007 elections (ref A). If discussed in June as originally planned, Parliament would not be able to conclude debate before the summer recess, meaning there would be no serious discussion until October. She said the GOK was working on a "unified position" on redistricting and while there was "almost unanimous" agreement on reducing the number of constituencies from 25 to 10, there was serious disagreement on the future size and shape of the reduced constituencies. Dr. Ma'souma explained that if districts were configured based on population, tribal groups would benefit while some small districts currently held by liberals could change hands. Other configurations to be considered could take into account the demographics of the area, creating districts whose majorities were Shi'a, for example. She bemoaned that there was no ideal formula and either option would generate criticism.

Redistricting Good for the GOK's Image and Good for Women

¶3. (C) Nevertheless, she believed that electoral district reform was essential for two overriding reasons. First, GOK critics accused the Government of being anti-reform. Taking on the district issue would erase this charge. She commented that in discussions on the GOK commitment to reform, she had personally come under attack by independent MPs for her efforts to tighten the controls on voter registration. Previously, voters could move, on paper, to districts where they thought their votes could make a difference. She pressed for regulations requiring the registration of an address along with the voter's name to limit abuse of the system. Independent MPs, who had supported reform, now opposed it because they believed it would adversely affect them. Second, redistricting will even the playing field for

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women. With the current 25 districts, Dr. Ma'souma said there was no chance for a woman to win (ref D). Tribal districts accounted for 16 of the existing districts and competition was fierce within the remaining nine where loyalties are divided among religious affiliation, family ties, and business relationships. She asserted that larger districts favored women.

Kuwaiti Women Need Help to Run for Office and Win

¶4. (C) Further commenting on women's political participation, Dr. Ma'souma noted her displeasure with the effectiveness of Kuwait's women's groups and NGOs. She said that legislation allowing the automatic registration of women voters (Ref E), which she pushed, took a lot of pressure off of the women's groups, freeing them to focus on encouraging women to vote. She referred to the development of a project with UNDP to raise awareness about the importance of voting, but expressed regret at the slow pace of overall progress in raising political consciousness among women. Commenting on the lone female candidate for the Municipal Council seat now open after the incumbent was appointed to the Parliament (ref C), she said her campaign was a test case for people to demonstrate their support for women candidates. She was not optimistic about Janan Ramadan Bushihri's chances for being elected to the Council, explaining that with seven candidates running for the seat, her support base would be eroded. Recalling her June 2005 meeting with NEA PDAS Cheney, Dr. Ma'souma said Kuwaiti women needed to be encouraged to run for office and that MEPI-funded training programs had been very successful and should be repeated (refs I and J).

Labor Law Needed to Lessen Worker Exploitation

¶5. (SBU) Commenting on other legislative priorities, Dr. Ma'souma said passage of a new labor law was on the GOK priority list for the legislative session. She reported

progress on measures to protect Kuwait's 450,000 domestic workers, but said the real challenge was implementation and the need to change the mentality of Kuwaiti employers and address shady practices in the sending countries. She admitted that Kuwait needed a new law, but said that equal attention must be paid to the source countries. She cited the Bangladeshi Prime Minister's decision to ban the travel of women under 35 to Gulf states as an effective tool in combating human trafficking and worker exploitation.

Slow, but Steady Progress on the Five-Year Plan

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¶6. (SBU) Reviewing progress on the Ministry's five-year plan for the Government, she said the Cabinet would soon discuss it so that it could be reviewed by the Supreme Planning Board before going to Parliament. The budget-oriented plan sets economic, social, educational, health, and development goals for 2006-2011. The Minister hoped it would have Parliament's approval before the start of the new fiscal year on April 1.

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LEBARON